

Extra Notes on Westerns

The setting is key in westerns:

The setting plays a major role in one of the most important and common themes in westerns:

Civilization vs. Wilderness (similar to “man vs. nature”)

- **Civilization** = Settled towns and villages. Areas with ranches and farmland. Places where people have turned the soil of land to help grow crops and make a living.
- **Wilderness** = The areas outside of civilization -- usually mountains, prairies, and desert. Untamed land. Indian tribes also connect to “the wilderness” -- there were many tribes living on their native land. When white colonizers went into the Indian tribe’s territory, it often led to physical, if not bloody, conflicts. Indians, however, are also often shown to be proud and wise people. They are not strictly seen as a threat.

Time Period of Westerns

The time period of most westerns is usually the **second half of the 19th century (1850-1900)**. *True Grit* takes place in this span of time as well.

The characters are common

The types of characters in westerns often fall into one or more categories.

● **The outlaw (“bad guy”)**

- The antagonist -- the one who might act on his own as a menace to society or who might lead a band of his minion, consisting of criminals and other outlaws, on bank robberies, train robberies, and other crimes. They are usually known to travel from town to town, making a name for themselves for being immoral and destructive.

● **The hero**

- The protagonist -- this hero is a pure and ethical character, like an incorruptible sheriff who always does what is right and will stop at nothing to protect his town.

● **The flawed hero**

- Also a protagonist, but a more complex one -- someone who does the right thing, but who also has a vice or bad habit, such as drinking or gambling or who are trigger-happy (i.e. If told to capture someone “Dead or Alive”, they will usually choose “Dead”). This is a more common hero in modern westerns and other books and movies.

- The “Flawed heroes” represent the idea of civilization AND wilderness -- they have both civilized and wild elements about them

- **The love interest**

- The love interest is usually the opposite in personality to the hero or protagonist -- either she is a wild person who ends up with “the hero” or she is a more innocent person who ends up with the “flawed hero.”